

HEIDELBERG CATECHISM AREAS OF CONCERN TO BE CONSIDERED

The 218th General Assembly agreed to the appointment of a Special Committee of Fifteen to study the accuracy of the current translation of the Heidelberg Catechism. The special committee will be appointed by the Moderator of the 218th General Assembly to study the recommendation and bring back a proposal to the 219th General Assembly (2010). If that assembly approves the proposal, it will be sent to the presbyteries for approval. If two-thirds of the presbyteries vote to adopt the amendments to the catechism, it will return to the 220th General Assembly (2012). If that assembly approves the changes, then the corrected Heidelberg Catechism will replace the current version in *The Book of Confessions*.

The following Q/A from the current translation of the Heidelberg Catechism in the Book of Confession indicate the five areas of concern. Dr. Andreas K. Schuele, Aubrey Lee Brooks Professor of Biblical Theology at Union-PSCE shares his understanding of the issues in these five areas.

Q/A 19

Whence do you know this? (that Jesus Christ is the Mediator between us and God – see Q18)

From the holy gospel, which God himself revealed in the beginning in the Garden of Eden, afterward proclaimed through the holy patriarchs and prophets and foreshadowed through the sacrifices and other rites of the Old Covenant, and finally fulfilled through his own well-beloved Son.

Andreas K. Schuele comments

Ad 4.019

Question 19 plays a crucial role in the soteriology of the HD catechism. The focus here is on the question, from where do we have knowledge that Jesus Christ is the savior in whom we have redemption and justice (compare Question 18)? The answer that the catechism provides is the following: such knowledge comes to us through the holy gospel that one finds in different Scriptures of the Bible: God *revealed* the gospel for the first time in the paradise garden, he *proclaimed* it through the patriarchs and prophets, and he *gave it* a concrete, though still provisional, *form* in the ceremonial rites of the law. Eventually, God *fulfilled* the gospel through his own son. The point of this answer is to summarize the manifold ways in which the entire Bible talks about the gospel and about how the knowledge of the gospel becomes tangible.

The Book of Confessions puts a different spin on the depiction of the various instantiations of the gospel when it translates “rites of the Old Covenant” rather than “rites of the law,” which would be closer to the original German (“Zeremonien des Gesetzes”). The problem here is that the Book of Confessions employs covenantal language that is not found in the text itself. This seems to suggest that there are two covenants represented by the two Testaments of the Bible. Although the distinction between the Old and the New Covenant certainly has played and continues to play a critical role in the biblical hermeneutics of the Reformed tradition, such a categorical distinction does not seem to be intended in A 19. A further note of explanation may be in order. Otto Weber, editor of the German HD catechism, comments on A 19 as follows: “All the reformers agree that the gospel is not only voiced in the New Testament. Although law and gospel are fundamentally different ways of divine self-revelation, it would be inadequate to

conclude that the Old Testament was seen only as law and the New Testament only as gospel. The HD catechism even goes beyond this common conviction: it sees in the Old Covenant already ‘proclaimed’ and ‘prefigured’ what was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Along this line ... the so-called ‘federal theology’ developed that understands the entire Bible as a testation (“Bekundung”) of several divine covenants.”

Q/A 74

Are infants also to be baptized?

Yes, because they, as well as their parents, are included in the covenant and belong to the people of God. Since both redemption from sin through the blood of Christ and the gift of faith from the Holy Spirit are promised to these children no less than to their parents, infants are also by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, to be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Covenant by circumcision. In the new Covenant baptism has been instituted to take its place.

Andreas K. Schuele comments

Ad 4.074

A related issue surfaces in Q 74 (“Are infants also to be baptized?”). In the original German, the catechism talks about “the (one) covenant” in which elders and infants are equally included. The sign of this covenant in the Old Testament was circumcision whereas in the New Testament baptism took this place. The idea is that the covenant between God and his people comprises both Old and New Testaments. It is therefore confusing and even misleading when the Book of Confessions translates “Old and New Testament” as “Old and the New Covenant.”

Q/A 33

Why is he (Christ) called “God’s only-begotten son,” since we also are God’s children?

Because Christ alone is God’s own eternal Son, whereas we are accepted for his sake as children of God by grace.

Andreas K. Schuele comments

Ad 4.033

Here the HD catechism addresses the question why Jesus is called God’s only-begotten son, although we, too, are children of God. The catechism explains that God the father and the son share the same nature (literally translated, Christ is God’s “eternal natural son”), whereas this is not the case with human beings, who are, as the Book of Confessions renders it, “accepted as children of God.” A problem with the German in this case is that the term “angenommen” is fairly general and can be translated as “accepted” or “adopted.” The Latin version of the HD catechism uses “adoptati” and thus supports the idea that we are God’s adopted children.

Q/A 55

What do you understand by the “communion of saints”?

First, that believers one and all, as partakers of the Lord Christ, and all of his treasures and gifts, shall share in one fellowship. Second, that each one ought to know that he is obliged to use his gifts freely and with joy for the benefit and welfare of other members.

Andreas K. Schuele comments

Ad 4.055

The answer to Q 55 (“What do you understand by ‘the communion of saints?’”) states that, as partakers of Jesus Christ and of his treasures and gifts, we also share fellowship with each other. According to the HD catechism, sharing in the salvific gifts of Christ is a present reality that shapes the communion of saints already in the here and now. The original German expresses this through the present tense (“Die Gläubigen ... haben Gemeinschaft”). The Book of Confessions, however, employs the future tense (“believers ... shall share in one fellowship”), thus suggesting that the communion of the saints is a future goal that has yet to be accomplished.

Q/A 87

Can those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved?

Certainly not! Scriptures says, “Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God.”

Andreas K. Schuele Comment

Ad 4.087

It seems advisable in this case to give a literal translation of the German version of the catechism’s answer to the question whether those who remain in their ungrateful and impenitent ways can be saved: “By no means! Because Scripture states that no idolater, adulterer, thief, drunkard, or slanderer will inherit the kingdom of God.” The biblical passages that are mentioned in A 87 as reference texts are 1 Cor 6:9-10, Eph 5:5-6, and 1 John 3:14. It is clear that the Book of Confessions does not provide a translation of the original catechism but replaces the text of the catechism with the so called ‘vice catalogue’ of 1 Cor 6:9-10. In other words, the question in this case is not whether the Book of Confessions is truthful to the original version of the catechism, because the wording here seems to have been changed quite intentionally. A second set of issues emerges when one looks at the translation that has been chosen for 1 Cor 6:9-10. Although the language in this catalog is quite explicit, a synopsis of the different translations in major editions of the Bible reveals that there is no consensus about what the terms that are used here mean more specifically. In concluding it seems appropriate to indicate that with regard to both the original catechism and the Greek text of 1 Cor 6:9-10 the Book of Confessions offers a version of A 87 that makes it susceptible to questions and criticisms.